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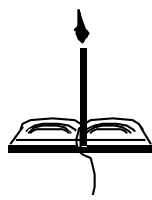
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May God bless you as you study His Word.



Old Testament Study: Malachi 3:13-18

Attitudes in Serving God

¹³“You have said harsh things against me,” says the LORD.

“Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’

¹⁴“You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out His requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?’ ¹⁵But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.”

¹⁶Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in His presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored His name.

¹⁷“They will be mine,” says the LORD Almighty, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. ¹⁸And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

The Lord must yet again rebuke some of the children of Israel: “**You have said harsh things against me,’ says the LORD. ‘Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’ You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out His requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape’”** (vss. 13–15).

The Lord rebukes them for what they said: “**You have said harsh things against me,’ says the Lord.**” And what did they say?: “**You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God.’”** They are rebuked for demeaning the service of God. Notice that the Lord considers what they said to be speaking against Him. To declare service for God as futile demeans God Himself, and implies that He is not worthy to be served.

Their problem was that they approached service to God with a mercenary spirit. They asked: “**What did we gain by carrying out His requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Al-**

mighty?" (vs. 14). It is wrong to serve God with the primary motive being: **"What do we gain?"** Their primary goal in serving God was to profit materially. They thought that because they served God, He must serve them. They served "not from love to God, but in the hope of being well paid for it in outward prosperity; when this was withheld, they charged God with being unjust, forgetting alike that God requires very different motives from theirs to accompany outward observances, and that God rewards even the true worshipper not so much in this life as in the life to come" [JFB, 723].

Their problem was that they were too focused on material riches, so that they did not take advantage of the spiritual riches that are poured out on servants of God. You see, in this world, the benefits received by serving God are primarily internal, rather than external, and as such, they are unseen by the untrained eye. The servant of God may not be rich in his bank account, but he is spiritually rich, experiencing peace, resting in contentment and enjoying a sense of purpose in life. He has communion with God, and gets to taste the powers of the world to come. All things work together for his good, and he lives in confidence, being an heir to divine glory.

The ungodly man who tries to serve God has a sense of futility because he sees that **"evildoers prosper."** He envies these evildoers for their material riches, yet he envies the wrong things. "Vain are all the riches, honours, pleasures of this world, without the serving of God... What profit is there in all other things besides service to God]?" [Westminster Divines].

Now, we cannot deny that the prosperity of evildoers can be a stumbling block to many people, even believers, especially immature believers, who have yet to experience the fullness of the goodness of God that comes from a long walk with Him. God was not rebuking the children of Israel for merely wondering about mysteries they did not yet understand, He was rebuking them for the hasty conclusion that they jumped to: **"It is futile to serve God."** Malachi contrasts the behavior of the ungodly, who jumped to this hasty conclusion, with the way the godly handle such a difficult thing to understand: **"Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard"** (vs. 16). When encountering a difficult concept concerning spiritual matters, rather than jumping to a hasty conclusion that faults God, the godly man seeks to come to a proper understanding of things. He seeks counsel with other godly people to find answers. By faith, he trusts that God is just, and so, he simply cannot come to the conclusion that it is **"futile to serve God."** "As the ungodly spoke with one another habitually in disparagement of God's dealings, so the godly speak with one another habitually in justification and praise of God's dealings" [JFB, 724].

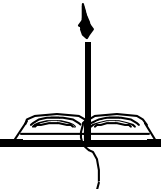
Do not think that God does not notice His people discussing spiritual matters, diligently seeking the answers to spiritual mysteries, wrestling with difficult passages in the Bible, discussing these things in passionate conversations with other believers at Bible studies. In fact, Malachi tells us: **“... and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in His presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored His name”** (vs. 16). God sees and takes note of those who wrestle with Biblical difficulties through diligent study of the Bible. Your time is not wasted.

Note, there are two traits of the godly, mentioned here by Malachi, that cause them to be more diligent than the ungodly, as they try resolve difficulties concerning spiritual matters. They **“fear the Lord”**, and they **“honor His name”**. The ungodly see the evildoers prosper and immediately conclude, **“It is futile to serve God.”** The godly **“fear the Lord”**, and so they would not jump to such a hasty conclusion that faults God; and they **“honor His name”**, thus they believe that God is a just God, and a loving God to those who serve Him, and so they would not hastily conclude that it is futile to serve God.

As mentioned, God honored the diligence of the godly by writing their names in a **“scroll of remembrance”** (not that God needs to write the names down to remember them; but He writes them as a tribute to honor the godly). And what will the fate of those whose names are in such a scroll be? Will their service to God be, in the end, futile? By no means! **“They will be mine,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘in the day when I make up my treasured possession”** (vs. 17). This is the opposite of futility! To be considered God’s own **“treasured possession”**!

And what of the evildoers? Will they forever prosper? Certainly not! The godly will be spared in the day of the Lord, **“just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him.”** As for the evildoers, their exact fate is not mentioned here, but suffice it to say, **“And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not”** (vs. 18). In the end, all will see and know the perfect justice and righteousness of God.

A Classic Study: PATIENCE IN AFFLICTION



A Classic Study by Richard Baxter (1615–1691)

[Here, we continue a reprint of Richard Baxter's work entitled *Obedient Patience*. In each article, Mr. Baxter gives advice on how to be patient through a specific type of affliction.]—*Ed.*

False Accusations, Defamations, Ruined Reputations

Another case that needeth patience is false accusation, defamation, and taking away our good name; when innocent men are proclaimed to be guilty of odious crimes, which they detest far more than their accusers do; yea, when the most conscionable men, that most fear all sin, are defamed by their teachers themselves, as well as by the brutish rabble, to be the worst of men in the land, unfit for human converse, or to be members of any society, and unworthy to live, at least out of jails. Sin is so much worse than poverty, or any bodily suffering, that the imputation of it unjustly seemeth a greater trial than to be taken for a beggar, or a leper. But the great trial is when godly magistrates or ministers of Christ are taken for rogues, traitors, schismatics, unconscionable villains, by which their endeavors for the souls of men are rendered useless: and worst of all, when a malignant generation shall make the generality of men fearing God, and living religiously, to be taken for the most wicked, dangerous hypocrites in the land. By this, young and unexperienced persons, and the ignorant multitude, are brought to a contempt or hatred of serious, practical religion, and made the enemies of their best friends, and of the means of their own salvation.

In this sad case, we must not on pretence of patience, and contempt of honour, be insensible of the snares that are laid by Satan to deceive the multitude, and undo souls; nor of the heinous wrong that is done to Christ, and the Christian religion and name. Yea, this horrid crime, when it is common, doth so much threaten the destruction of a land, and the removal of the gospel, that it should make us all mourn and earnestly pray, that God would not leave so bad a people that say, "Depart from us, we desire not the knowledge of thy ways." What wonder if Christ give up that land to darkness, and deceit, and Satan, and take away His gospel, when the practice of it is made a common scorn, and taken for an intolerable evil? When God's peculiar people were delivered into captivity, the reason is given, "**All the chief of the priests and the people trans-**

gressed very much, and the Lord sent His messengers, because He had compassion on His people, and His dwelling-places; but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised His words, and mis-used His prophets, till the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, and there was no remedy" (II Chron. 36:14, AV). "I will get me to the great men, and speak to them; for they have known the way of the Lord. But these have altogether broken the yoke, and burst the bonds: therefore a lion shall slay them" etc. (Jer. 5:5, AV).

When Christ and His apostles were taken for intolerable, God would tolerate the nation no longer, but gave them up to the cruellest destruction that hath been heard of in the world, and the remnants of them are scattered, cursed people in all countries to this day. When they cried of such as Paul, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, it is not fit that he should live" (Acts 22:22); God concluded, "Away with such a wicked nation, scatter them as cursed over the earth.". They that will themselves escape the destruction in such a land, must mourn and cry for all its abominations (see Ezek. 9:4); and must grieve for the reproach of the solemn assemblies (see Zeph. 3:18). And a Noah, Daniel, or Job in it, may save none but their own souls.

But yet as our reputation is but our own personal interest, whether we are defamed for the common cause of conscience and obedience to God, or whether it be by any private, malicious slander against ourselves, we may bear it patiently.

For, 1. What is our reputation, but the thoughts and words of men concerning us? And how small a matter is this as to ourselves! If they think well of you, you are never the better; and if they think ill of you, you are not the worse. If you be poor or sick, or pained, will it ease you, or make you rich, for men to think and say that you are well or rich? And if you be rich and well, will it make you poor or sick for men to think or say that you are so? And as the thoughts of men alter not your state, so what is man that his thoughts should be so much regarded by you? Thoughts are such unseen, transitory actings of the mind, that we have much ado to make men believe that there is any law for them, or any great sin in them, or that God Himself regardeth them. And when a man is asleep, or thinks of other things, those thoughts are all laid by: and he must quickly die, and lie in darkness; and then what are his thoughts, or what is it to you what that rotten carcass lately thought of you when it lived?

2. The usual cause of impatience under personal disgrace and slander, is pride in ourselves, which is a matter of a thousandfold more hurt and grief than the loss of our reputation is. Pride is an overvaluing our reputations or honour with men; a desire to be better thought of than we deserve, as to greatness, wisdom, or goodness; or else an over-great esteem and desire of that reputation, which is indeed our due. Did you not overvalue it, you could easilier spare it, and bear the loss of it. O fear the devilish sin of pride a thousandfold more than any dishonour! A truly humbled soul can easily bear the words and thoughts of men, as to its own interest; for he knoweth his own failings, and liveth not on man.

3. If you will not be hypocrites, let there be some proportion between your confessions to God, and your sense of the accusations and reproaches

of men. In prayer you study enlarged confessions, and how much evil do you (truly) say of yourselves. And if another should wrongfully add somewhat more, methinks you might endure it. Is it not an incongruous thing to hear one in prayer an hour together on a day of humiliation accuse himself of the breach of every one of the ten commandments; or for troubled, fearful persons, in all their discourse with ministers or friends, to accuse themselves as utterly graceless, and resist all that can be said to the contrary; and yet for the same persons to be disquieted and impatient, if another accuse them over-much, yea, or less than they accuse themselves? There is some hypocrisy in this.

4. Praise is a more dangerous thing to us than dispraise; and therefore our friends usually hurt us more than our enemies. Flattery is pleasing to nature, and dispraise displeasing; but it is pleasing things only that are overloved, and things overloved that undo the soul. Praise is the usual fuel of pride, and pride the ready way to ruin; but dispraise calleth us to examine and judge ourselves, and is a help to humiliation. And though praise be due to all that is good, and other men owe it to wise and good men; yet the wisest and best are so apt to be tickled and pleased with it, that they seldom escape some degree of proud infection by it.

5. It is God's judgment to which we stand or fall. If He calls us His children, it is a small matter what men call us. If He justifieth us, who is He that shall condemn us? As Paul saith, "**It is a small matter to me to be judged of man**" (or at man's bar, or day); "**I have one that judgeth me, even the Lord,**" (I Cor. 4:3, AV). Why should he make a great matter what men think or say of him, who believeth that he must live or die forever, as God shall judge him, and not as men judge him?

6. The thoughts and words of men do not so much as touch our skin. If they be let into our hearts, and made our pain, it is not they, but ourselves that do it.

7. What kind of men be they that slander, reproach, and scorn men for their duty to God or man? Are they not miserable fools, led blindfold towards hell in Satan's chains? And are we not happy and safe in Christ's justification? And will a lord or prince be cast down if a bedlam shall revile him, or because a child of seven years old thinks meanly of him? How easily do learned men bear the contempt of the unlearned, and great men bear the obloquy of beggars? It is not wise or godly men that dishonour you for being wise and godly; but only the ignorant and ungodly that speak against that which they never knew.

8. If it be for your obedience to God, the reproach is more against Him than you: it was He, and not you, that made the law which you obey. He that accuseth anyone for obeying his father, master, or prince, doth most accuse them that commanded him. If it be a fault and dishonour to mind heaven above earth, and to obey God and His word before man, it is long of God that so commanded us, and not of us. And if they accuse God, be sure He is sufficient to confute them, and to defend Himself; He will stop the mouths of all blasphemers, and you may boldly trust Him if you suffer for Him, and your cause is His. A barking dog may sooner stop the course of the sun, than a blasphemer conquer God.

9. Yea, it is one of the greatest honours in the world to be dishon-

oured for God. You are deepliest engaged for His cause and He for you: you are principal soldiers in His army; for suffering is the victory of the soldiers of Christ. If God's name, and cause, and interest, and promise cannot put honour on you, nothing can.

10. The reproacher more dishonoureth himself than you. It is a dishonour indeed to be a false accuser, but none to be a patient sufferer.

11. And though we be not guilty of what malicious liars accuse us, we are guilty of many other sins, which God may correct us for by their tongues.

12. Christ went before us in this kind of suffering. **“He made Himself of no reputation, but endured the cross, despising the shame. He endured the contradiction of sinners against Himself,”** (Heb. 12:2, etc.). He that came into the world to destroy the works of the devil, and to save men from sin, was said to be a sinner, and to have a devil, and to do His miracles by the devil's help. They accused Him to be a glutton and a wine-bibber, and a Sabbath-breaker, and a familiar with publicans and sinners, and a despiser of traditions and ceremonies and church government, and a usurper, and a traitor against Caesar, and a blasphemer against God; and that it might be believed, crucified Him as such between malefactors, as worse than Barabbas, a murderer, and fastened His accusation on His cross, and to this day they call Him a deceiver. And His apostles were accordingly accused: Paul was called a pestilent fellow, a mover of sedition, that taught men against Caesar and the law, and turned the world upside down, not worthy to live upon the earth. The apostles were made a gazing-stock, the scorn of men, the filth and offscouring of all things. And did we not resolve to follow Christ and them, and to bear this cross?

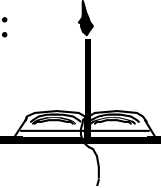
13. But oh what a joyful support to us should it be, to foresee by faith the approaching day when all this will be set right, and godliness will be a dishonour no more; when Christ will come to be glorified in His saints, and admired in all them that now believe (See II Thess. 1:10,11); and when these accusers and slanderers will all be silenced, confuted, and confounded: and sin will be an everlasting shame. Oh what a change will that day make! Then who will have the honour and glory, and who will be cast out as the dung?

Objection: But odious lies are divulged, printed, and believed of me, and strangers and posterity will not know but all is true.

Answer: And what if it be so? It toucheth you not now; and neither your body in the grave will feel it, nor your soul in heaven. **“Be patient, brethren, to the coming of our Lord”** (James 5:7, AV). Lies and false history are the devil's way, by which he deceiveth most of the world. It is little thought by the readers how much history is false.... And in the mean time, the wicked will believe the father of lies, and we cannot help it. But the faithful honour upright men not the less, but the more, for calumnies which they endure; and had they not been prone to over-honour them, holidays and relics had not been used as they are.

Let it be your care to give the liars no occasion by your sin; and then mourn for the success of Satan, but joyfully wait for the judgment of God.

New Testament Study: Matthew 13:24-43



More Parables

²⁴Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷“The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

²⁸“‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

²⁹“‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. ³⁰Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

³¹He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³²Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”

³³He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

³⁴Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; He did not say anything to them without using a parable. ³⁵So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet:

“I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world.”

³⁶Then He left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to Him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.”

³⁷He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

⁴⁰"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will weed out of His kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. ⁴²They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear."

Matthew continues here in chapter 13 relating some of the parables that Jesus spoke. As we have stated, all of the parables in this chapter speak in some way about the division of people in this world into those who belong to the kingdom of God, and those who do not. The different parables deal with various aspects and consequences of the fact that the people of the world are divided into these two groups.

In this section, there are three parables that are closely related. I believe that the fact that they are closely related is reflected by the structure of this section. First, we have Jesus telling the parable of the wheat and the tares (or weeds, as the NIV translates). Then, two more parables are told: the parable of the mustard seed, and the parable of the leaven (or yeast, as the NIV translates). Next, the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares is given. So, the telling of the second and third parables in this section is bracketed by the telling of the first parable and its interpretation. This implies, I believe, that the interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares guides us in the interpretation of the other two parables.

The parable of the wheat and the tares is told by Jesus in verses 24 through 30. The interpretation is then given later in verses 37 through 43. We will look at both the telling of the parable and its interpretation together. Jesus tells the parable: **"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 'An enemy did this,' he replied. The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let them both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bun-**

dles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn” (vss. 24–30).

Later, “His disciples came to him and said, ‘Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field’” (vs. 36). We are blessed that Jesus answered the disciples with a definitive interpretation of this parable, so that there is no room for error in our understanding of this particular parable. First, Jesus gives a very specific key to the symbols used in the parable: “He answered, ‘The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels’” (vs. 37–39). We are told in the telling of the parable that the sower “sowed good seed in *his* field” (vs. 24). The world is Jesus’ field. He, as Creator, sowed good seed, and continues to sow good seed, raising up “sons of the kingdom.” Jesus’ parable departs a bit from real-life, in that the owner of the field normally would not sow the seed, but his servants would. But in the parable, the owner does sow the seed, as if to say it is through Jesus’ work, not His servants, that sons of the kingdom are raised up.

“But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away” (vs. 25). That the enemy sowed while “everyone was sleeping” does not mean to imply that the devil was given an opportunity because of the servant’s negligence (in fact, according to Jesus’ interpretation, the servants do not represent anything specific in the parable). Rather, it implies that the enemy selects the most opportune time to sow his seed.

Interestingly, and realistically, it became evident to the servants that the enemy had sowed seed some time after the enemy did it. The servants were taken by surprise primarily because, at first, the weeds looked just like the wheat. The presence of the weeds mixed in with the wheat came as a surprise to the servants, but it did not take the owner by surprise. He knew right away that “an enemy did this” (vs. 28). The servants only noticed the weeds “when the wheat sprouted.” In the same way, the ungodliness of most people is not immediately evident. “When such men first profess the true Religion, they so cunningly hide their principles in obscure terms, and veil their wickedness with shows of holiness, that it cannot presently appear, who are good, and who evil: but afterwards, when good men are nearer their maturity, and the wicked to their height of maliciousness, an evident difference appears” [Westminster Divines]. There are many false professors of Christianity, and these people are the most dangerous to the cause of Christ. Those who openly reject Christ are less a danger than false professors, because the world thinks that the false professors are true believers. So, when the false professors do ungodly acts, the cause of Christ is blamed for their actions.

The fact that the ungodly and godly live together in this world is a

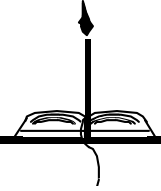
source of frustration to many godly people. To try to get around this, there have been many attempts throughout history when godly people have tried to separate themselves from the rest of the world. But these attempts have only had limited, and temporary, success. For godliness is not hereditary. When the next generation comes along, even though they may come from godly parents, there is no guarantee that they will be as godly as their parents were. “Nowhere on earth can we maintain a settlement of saints alone” [Spurgeon, 178]. We must face the fact that, in this age, the children of God must share this world with the children of the enemy. In all places, in all levels of society, even within church fellowships, the godly intermingle with the ungodly. The best way to remedy this somewhat is to always do your part in bringing the ungodly to a knowledge of our glorious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, through a godly example, and through a faithful witness.

As pointed out in the parable, there will come a time when the godly and the ungodly will be separated. It will come at **“the end of this age”**: **“As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out His, and they will weed out of His kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear”** (vss. 40–43). This parable was important in educating the disciples about God’s ultimate plan. Most of the Jews at the time believed that the Messiah would come and immediately execute His judgment on the ungodly. “The Jews, including our Lord’s disciples, would naturally think, with their rooted notions of Messiah’s reign, that He would promptly destroy all those who did not submit to His authority, as was common with Oriental conquerors, as David himself was known to have done. Their views and feelings are illustrated by the wish of James and John to call down fire from heaven and consume the Samaritan village, for refusing to receive Jesus (see Luke 9:54)” [Broadus, 299]. This parable definitively teaches that the ultimate execution of God’s judgment would take place at **“the end of this age”**, at some time future to the Jews of that time, and still future to us.

It is important to note the reason given for the owner not destroying the weeds immediately: **“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them’”** (vs. 29). The weeds are not destroyed, for the owner does not want to harm the wheat in the process of destroying the weeds. This tells us that, at the end of the age, the ungodly will not suffer God’s wrath along with the ungodly. As Paul tells us: **“For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ”** (I Thess. 5:9).

(This study will continue in the next issue.)

A Topical Study: The Frailty of Life



The Frailty of Life, pt. 2

Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure. (Job 14:1-2).

My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue: "Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath." (Ps. 39:3-5)

What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. (James 4:14)

This is the second article in a three part series about the frailty of life. Each of the articles will study the context of one of the three above passages concerning the frailty of life. In this article, we will look at the passage in Psalm 39.

The Futility of a Life Lived for Oneself

- ¹I said, "I will watch my ways
and keep my tongue from sin;
I will put a muzzle on my mouth
as long as the wicked are in my presence."
²But when I was silent and still,
not even saying anything good,
my anguish increased.
³My heart grew hot within me,
and as I meditated, the fire burned;
then I spoke with my tongue:
⁴"Show me, O LORD, my life's end
and the number of my days;
let me know how fleeting is my life.

⁵You have made my days a mere handbreadth;
the span of my years is as nothing before you.
Each man's life is but a breath. *Selah*

⁶Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro:
he bustles about, but only in vain;
he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it.

⁷But now, Lord, what do I look for?
My hope is in You. (Psalm 39:1-7)

In this psalm, David describes how he tried to be righteous on his own, through his own works, under his own strength. He defiantly resolved: **"I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin"** (vs. 1). His resolve was weakened, however, when the wicked were in his presence, corrupting him with their evil influence, most likely stirring up sinful desires of revenge in his heart. In that environment, David, in order to continue in his righteousness, **"put a muzzle"** on his own mouth. It got to the point where David could not trust himself to do anything (lest he stumble in his way) or say anything (lest cursing, derision or blasphemy corrupt his words); instead, he remained **"silent and still. . . not even saying anything good"** (vs. 2). Despite his determination and his attempts to carry out his resolution, his **"anguish increased"** and his **"heart grew hot"** within him. As **"the fire burned"**, he exclaimed in his despair: **"Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days"** (vs. 4).

We all, at one point or another, think that we can make it on our own. We say, as William Ernest Henley, "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul". David, in the first three verses of this Psalm, thought that his own determination and resolve was all that he needed to be righteous. Stating his independence in those verses he proclaimed: **"I will", "I will", "I", "I", and "I"**.

But such a resolution will necessarily end in anguish. Man cannot attain righteousness through his own means. He will always be surrounded by corrupt influences. Even if he employs extreme measures, such as muzzling his mouth or remaining forever **"silent and still, not even saying anything good"**, yet his anguish will only increase and his heart will burn. He will come to the realization that, in his frailty, he cannot make it on his own, he cannot attain the righteousness he had resolved to achieve.

David realized this, and so exclaimed: **"Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life"** (vs. 4). David was, in effect, asking the Lord for perspective. He asked the Lord to prove to his own heart that he cannot make it on his

own. David wanted to be convinced of his own frailty, so as to strengthen his dependence on and, thus, his relationship with God. There are times when we intellectually realize that we need to improve our relationship with God, but, in our hearts, we do not feel like doing so. During these times, we should ask the Lord, as David did, to give us the desire to improve our relationship with Him.

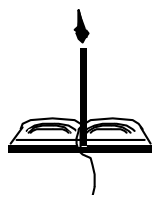
David asked for perspective and God gave him perspective, for David stated in the next verse: **“You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man’s life is but a breath”** (vs. 5). David realized the frailty of his life, the shortness of it as compared to eternity. We can ignore God in this life and pursue a righteousness of our own, and pursue our own desires and interests, but what have we gained? All we gain is a perceived control over a life whose span is a **“mere handbreadth”**. In doing so, we hazard giving up eternity. As Jesus said: **“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?”** (Mark 8:36).

David goes on to point out the emptiness of such a life: **“Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro: he bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it”** (vs. 6). So much time, money and effort is spent on that which will not last. When we recognize the brevity of life, we cannot help but see the futility of living our lives for the temporal things, things which will pass away. This realization will either drive one to despair or drive one to seek eternity, and eternity is gained only through Christ, for **“whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”** (John 3:16) and **“whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life”** (John 3:36).

So, the only solution to the despair that comes from the realization that man is frail and that life is futile is to turn to the Lord. We must get our eyes off the temporal and turn them to the eternal. Thus, David concluded: **“But now, LORD, what do I look for? My hope is in you”** (vs. 7). David was in anguish when he was saying **“I”, “I”, “I”**, as he did in the first three verses; but, in the end, he realized that his only hope was not in himself, but the Lord.

Yes, Lord, give us the perspective to realize that our only hope for a meaningful life and a blessed eternity is in You. Guide us, by Your Spirit, into an existence that makes the most of our brief time on earth, in service to Your Kingdom. We praise You that You have provided a way, through Your Son, for us to be credited the righteousness that we need in order to enter Your presence. In Jesus’ name we pray these things, Amen.

(In the next issue, this series will conclude with a study of James 4:13-17)



A Study in Psalms: Psalm 53

Psalm 53 - The Fool

For the director of music. According to mahalath.
A maskil of David.

- ¹The fool says in his heart,
“There is no God.”
They are corrupt, and their ways are vile;
there is no one who does good.
- ²God looks down from heaven on the sons of men
to see if there are any who understand,
any who seek God.
- ³Everyone has turned away,
they have together become corrupt;
There is no one who does good, not even one.
- ⁴Will the evildoers never learn—
those who devour my people as men eat bread
and who do not call on God?
- ⁵There they were, overwhelmed with dread,
where there was nothing to dread.
God scattered the bones of those who attacked you;
you put them to shame,
for God despised them.
- ⁶Oh, that salvation for Israel
would come out of Zion!
When God restores the fortunes of His people,
let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!

This psalm is a revised version of Psalm 14, revised by David himself (as the inscription notes). “It is another edition by the same author, emphasized in certain parts, and re-written for another purpose” [Spurgeon, 433]. In both psalms, David speaks of man’s rejection of God and its resulting wickedness. “The evil nature of man is here brought before our view a second time, in almost the same inspired words. All repetitions are not vain repetitions... David after a long life, found men no better than they were in his youth... If our age has advanced from fourteen to fifty-three, we shall find the doctrine of this Psalm more evident than in our youth” [Spurgeon, 433].

David begins the psalm by defining what is, according to the Bible, the

height of foolishness: **“The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’”** (vs. 1). In this verse, we see that the Biblical name for the atheist is **“fool”**. “Being a fool he speaks according to his nature; being a great fool he meddles with a great subject, and comes to a wild conclusion” [Spurgeon, 433]. Contrary to popular belief, it is not those who believe in God, but those who do not believe in God that are fools. “The leading truths of natural religion are so clear that it is folly to deny them.” [Plumer, 196]

Some nowadays may think that they are modern, advanced thinkers when they declare that there is no God, but atheism is nothing new; and the acceptance of atheism in society, its voguishness, comes and goes like a passing fad. “All the unrenewed persons are fools before God, how wise soever they may seem to men” [Dickson, 318]. Sometimes, atheists are admired in society. “There is too much dainty dealing nowadays with atheism; it is not a harmless error, it is an offensive, putrid sin, and righteous men should look upon it in that light” [Spurgeon, 434]. At other times, atheism is looked down upon and, during those times, atheists generally keep quiet. In the psalm, the fool keeps his atheistic statements **“in his heart.”** Certainly, at the time of David’s writing, a time of God’s visible intervention in the nation of Israel, it would have been absurd to claim aloud that there is no God. Undoubtedly, many of those who were speaking atheism **“in their hearts”**, were at the same time paying lip service to a belief in God. “Words are cheap; but what a man ‘says in his heart’ shows whether he is a wise man or a fool, a saint or a sinner” [Plumer, 196].

Atheism, being the depth of foolishness, leads to depravity, and so, David notes that the atheists **“are corrupt, and their ways are vile.”** All corruption is the result of disbelief, for how can one have a strong awareness of the presence of God, and yet still be corrupt? “The atheist is, morally, as well as mentally, a fool, a fool in the heart as well as in the head; a fool in morals as well as in philosophy... ‘No God’, being interpreted, means no law, no order, no restraint to lust, no limit to passion. Who but a fool would be of this mind?” [Spurgeon, 433]. The corruption of the secret atheists reveal, more accurately than their words, the belief of their hearts, their belief that **“there is no God.”**

Now, it is not surprising to find that atheists are condemned in the Bible. However, David goes on to say, **“There is no one who does good.”** David now switches to God’s point of view of the situation on earth: **“God looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God”** (vs. 2). However, **“Everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one”** (vs. 3). God searches for a good man, but does not find him. “Had there been one understanding man, one true lover of his God, the divine eye would have discovered him” [Spurgeon, 434]. In God’s eyes, depravity, indeed a form of atheism, is universal. David’s language is unambiguous, unqualified and all-inclusive. He says: **“any”, “any”, “everyone”, “no one”, “not even one.”** We all stumble into atheism whenever we sin, for in effect, by sinning, we are saying, **“There is no God,”** or at least “God is not watch-

ing.” As stated above, if we truly had an awareness of the presence of God, we would not sin. Oh, how we condemn the atheist; how we shake our heads at his denial of God; but when we sin, are not we denying God through our actions? We may deny God, but our denial does not cause Him to go away. He **“looks down”** and sees us in our sin, and holds us accountable for it. God is not indifferent to the goings-on of men, though atheists think He is. Disbelief in God does not cause Him to disappear.

Though He searches, God finds none who **“understand”**: we do not understand the seriousness of sin; we do not understand the hatred of God for sin; we do not understand the power of God to judge sin. Also, He finds none that **“seek God”**: “None seek Him aright, and as He ought to be sought, nor can [they do so] while they live in sin; for men in seeking God fail in many things: as, First, men seek Him not for Himself. Secondly, they seek Him not alone, but other things with Him. Thirdly, they seek other things before Him, as worldlings do. Fourthly, they seek Him coldly or carelessly. Fifthly, they seek Him inconstantly; [like] Judas and Demas. Sixthly, they seek Him not in His word, as heretics do. Seventhly, they seek Him not in all His word, as hypocrites do. Lastly, they seek Him not seasonably and timely, as profane, impenitent sinners do; have no care to depend upon God’s word, but follow their own lusts and fashions of this world.” [Thomas Wilson, in Spurgeon, 171]

Moreover, **“everyone has turned away”** (vs. 3). In our natural selves, without the Spirit of God, we turn from God. As Paul points out: **“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned”** (1 Cor. 2:14). In turning aside, **“they have together become corrupt”** (vs. 3). Sin begets sin. When immorality is hip (as it is in a large part today), many become immoral, and the moral standards of all society are lowered so that even the righteous are drawn into sin.

Finally, **“there is no one who does good”** (vs. 3), and (if by chance we do not fully comprehend this) David adds, **“not even one.”** How can this be, with all the charitable works in the world? But think: do we do any good thing without mixed motives? Do we tithe, but for the tax write-off? Do we serve, but for the accolades of men? Do we preach, but to show off our oratorical skills? Do we evangelize, but to make points with God? Do we love, but to be loved? As Jesus said, **“No one is good—except God alone”** (Mark 10:17).

Having established that **“there is no one who does good, not even one”**, David in the next verses does make a distinction between God’s people and those who will be judged by God: **“Will the evildoers never learn—those who devour my people as men eat bread and who do not call on God?”** (vs. 4). Those who will be judged, the **“evildoers”**, are those **“who do not call on God”**. And so, though everyone sins, some call on the Lord and some do not. Those who call on the Lord, call on Him for forgiveness of sin, for forgiveness for not seeking Him, for salvation from judgment.

As for the others, those **“evildoers never learn”** (vs. 4). They do not **“learn”**, despite evidence of God’s existence in the world around them,

despite evidence of God's presence in the lives of His people. The evildoers **"devour"** God's people, often because God's people make them feel condemned for their apathy concerning God.

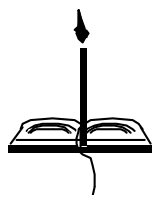
Though the evildoers do their best to persecute God's people, they do not live in a state of confidence in their own lot: **"There they were, overwhelmed with dread, where there was nothing to dread"** (vs. 5). They live in fear, because the awareness of the presence of God is not with them. One great advantage of being a child of God is the awareness we have of His presence, and the peace and confidence His presence brings to our lives. We know our sins are forgiven, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Evildoers must always be looking over their shoulders, expecting God's wrath to visit them for their sins. So, those who are so defiant in verse 1, by saying **"There is no God"**, later stand in fear, **"overwhelmed with dread."** And eventually, as David points out, God's wrath will visit them: **"God scattered the bones of those who attacked you; you put them to shame, for God despised them"** (vs. 5).

Consideration of these things causes David to cry out for the Messiah, for the One who would bring salvation: **"Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion"** (vs. 6). David knew that the misfortunes of the people of God are temporary, and that the Messiah would come in glory to save them. David here was crying out for the **"salvation of Israel"**. This is the salvation that the Jews of Christ's time were looking for. They were looking for Christ to overthrow the Roman government and set up His kingdom on earth. However, Christ first had a much more important mission for His first coming: to bring us our personal salvation. David was looking for the Messiah to bring peace to Israel; Christ first, more valuably, brought us peace with God.

David, though, longs for the time **"when God [will restore] the fortunes of His people"** (vs. 6). Make no mistake, the Lord Jesus Christ is coming back to earth to set up His kingdom. When He does, the salvation of His people will come once and for all, and the corruption of the evildoers will be done away with.

The mere thought of the Lord's salvation should cause us to shout with joy, so David says: **"Let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!"** The two personalities of the people of God praise Him: **"Jacob"**, the striver who grabs the heel of his brother, **"rejoices"**; **"Israel"**, the wrestler who holds on to the angel of the Lord until he receives a blessing, is **"glad."**

Indeed, Lord, we praise You for Your salvation, the greatest possession that we have. We praise You that You have reached down to save us, though we have so largely rejected You. Give us, by Your Spirit, a greater awareness of Your presence, so that we may live purer lives. We pray these things in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.



A Meditation: The Spiritual Chemist

The Spiritual Chemist by William Spurstowe (ca. 1666)

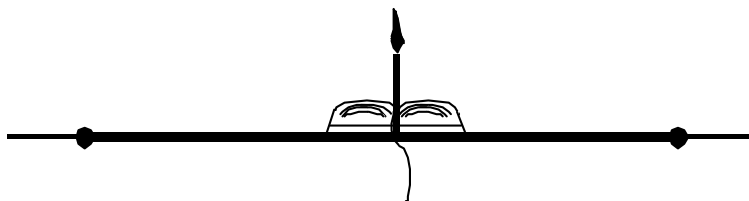
[As space permits, we will reprint sections of William Spurstowe's work entitled *The Spiritual Chemist*. In each article, Mr. Spurstowe meditates upon an ordinary object in God's creation, and develops a spiritual application from the meditation.]—*Ed.*

A Meditation Upon a Piece of Battered Plate

A Battered Plate is methinks an emblem of a suffering Saint, who by afflicting strokes may lose somewhat of his *accidental beauty*; but nothing of his *real worth*. In the plate the *fashion* is only marred; but the *substance* is neither diminished or embased. If you bring it to the scale, it weighs as much as it did; if you try by the touchstone, it is as good silver as it was. And is it not thus with a Saint when bruised and broken with many sore pressures? His luster and repute with men may be prejudiced and eclipsed by them, but not his *person* or his *worth* with God; if he be weighed in His unerring balance, he will not be found the lighter; if examined by His test, he will not be esteemed the less precious. It is not the cross that makes vile, but sin; not the *passive evils* which we suffer, but the *active evils* which we do. The one may render us *unamiable* to men, but the other makes us *unholy* before God; the one raise the casket, and the other makes a flaw in the jewel. Happy and wise therefore is that man who maketh Moses his choice to be his pattern in choosing affliction rather than sin; esteeming it better to be an oppressed Hebrew that builds the houses and palaces of brick, than an uncircumcised Egyptian to dwell in them, for when he is tried he shall receive the Crown of life which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him.

**A Meditation Upon
a Picture and a Statue
by William Spurstowe (ca. 1666)**

In what a differing manner is the image and representation of the same person brought into these two pieces of art? In the one it is effected by the soft and silent touches of the pencil, which happily convey *likeness* and *beauty* together. In the other it is formed by the rough and loud strokes of the hammer, and by the deep cuttings and sculptures of instruments of steel. In as strange and far differing way is the heavenly image of God formed in the souls of new converts, when first made partakers of the Divine Nature. In some God *paints* (as I may so speak) His own likeness by a still and calm delineation of it upon the table of their hearts. In others He *carves* it by afflicting them with a great measure of terrors, and wounding their souls with a thorough sense both of the guilt and defilement of sin. But in this diversity of working, God is no way necessitated, or limited by the disposition and temper of the matter, as other agents are; but is freely guided by the counsel of His own will, which is the sole rule and measure of all His actions towards the creature, as His Word is of theirs towards Him. Lord therefore do with me what Thou pleasest; let me be but thine, and I will not prescribe Thy wisdom the way to make me Thine; *bruise, break, wound, yea, kill*, Lord, so that I may be made alive again by Thy power, and bear Thy holy Image, according to which I was first made, and to which by Thy grace and might only I can be restored.



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True and False Service

“There be many things that move, and yet their motion is not an argument of life. A windmill when the wind serveth, moveth, and moveth very nim- bly too; yet this cannot be said to be a living creature. No, it moveth only by an external cause, by an artificial con- trivance. So it is also if a man see an- other man move, and move very fast, in those things which of themselves are the ways of God: you shall see him move as fast to hear a sermon as his neighbor doth; is as forward and hasty to thrust himself a guest to the Lord’s table (when God hath not bid him) as any. Now, the question is, what principle sets him a-work? If it be an inward principle of life, out of a sincere affection and love to God and His ordinances, it argueth that man hath some life of grace; but if it be some wind that bloweth on him—the wind of state, the wind of law, the wind of danger, of penalty, the wind of fashion or custom—to do as his neighbors do; if these or the like be the things that draw him thither, this is no argument of life at all: it is a cheap thing, it is a counterfeit and dead piece of service.”

-- Martin Day (ca. 1660)

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